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ENGLISH-YIDDISH ENCYCLOPEDIA DICTIONARY

*English-Yiddish Encyclopedic Dictionary, a Complete Lexicon
and Work of Reference in All Departments of Knowledge.*

Prepared under the Editorship of PAUL ABELSON, Ph.D.

Published by the JEWISH PRESS PUBLISHING COMPANY,
New York, 1915. pp. xix + 1749. With numerous text
figures and eleven coloured plates.

THERE are in New York and many others of our large cities a vast number of intelligent and lettered Jewish immigrants who are hampered in their educational and other ambitions by the lack of adequate knowledge of the language of the country that they have made their haven. They have in many cases not only to cope with the intrinsic difficulties of acquiring a new language and culture under conditions of poverty that leave little leisure for study, and at a time of life that is past the stage of linguistic flexibility, but they have also to contend with a more subtle factor. The tendency of Jewish immigrants to congregate into colonies, combined with the rather high level of taste and culture brought by a large proportion of them from the old world, fosters the development and maintenance in America of a specifically Judeo-German (Yiddish) culture (literature, theatre, social and economic endeavour, and so on), which more or less adequately satisfies the intellectual and aesthetic demands of the immigrants and renders the necessity for their linguistic and cultural assimilation less immediately imperative than might be supposed. Not that the transplantation and further development of this Judeo-German culture is in itself a reprehensible phenomenon, but, if the rapid and thorough acquirement of English be set as a goal, the conditions outlined must frankly be recognized as constituting an obstacle.

While the *English-Yiddish Encyclopedic Dictionary* addresses itself to all Yiddish-speaking foreigners in America that are able to read their mother tongue and are desirous of gaining a knowledge, elementary or thorough, of the English language, it is probably to the more cultured type of immigrant that it will prove of the greatest use. It will doubtless do much to enable him to overcome the cultural resistance that we have indicated. Dr. Abelson and his collaborators deserve our warmest commendation for their successful solution of a unique and difficult problem. There is here offered to the Jewish immigrant a mass of adequately illustrated information which is hardly inferior in bulk or quality to that contained in the native American's *Webster*.

In fact, one wonders whether the repast is not a bit too sumptuous. It seems fairly obvious that a work of this kind must, in the nature of things, be transitional in character. In other words, its *raison d'être* largely ceases with the fulfilment of its aims, as the scaffolding is demolished with the completion of the structure. Under these circumstances, one is somewhat puzzled to find valuable space devoted to the explanation in Judeo-German (the entries are English, all the explanatory matter is in Judeo-German) of such words as *heteratomic*, *quinquefoliate*, *incombustibility*, and hosts of others. Surely, one fancies, the student who feels impelled to seek light on the meaning of words such as these is bound to have progressed far enough in his study of English to be able to consult English works of reference. It seems indeed a pity that space so disposed of—and it forms no inconsiderable portion of the book—was not rather devoted to fuller information on the bread-and-butter topics suggested by the humbler entries. For the greater familiarity thus gained with the form and subject-matter of American thought the inquiring immigrant would gladly, we venture to think, have dispensed with the frills and furbelows. So far, indeed, is the *Encyclopedic Dictionary* from exercising restraint in this regard that nearly every page betrays to the man of normal English speech his depths of ignorance. In the face of the editors' authority I

should certainly not care to dispute the existence of such words as *nival*, *nivous*, *ort* (translated into Judeo-German as: 'a remainder, a fragment, that which is left over and is to be thrown away'), *connexity*, *incogitantly*, and *interfenestral*, but I submit that I would have preferred to see these at best nebulous beings housed in some such thesaurus as the *Oxford N. E. D.* than exposed to the quizzical stare of the unappreciative foreigner.

Yet, in view of the magnitude of Dr. Abelson's accomplishment, it seems unkind to insist on shortcomings such as these. To make amends, he has very commendably devoted considerable space to the explanation of idiomatic turns of expression, those bugaboos of all foreigners. Thus, it is refreshing to find justice done to such collocations as *come-down*, *come down on*, *come in for*, *come out with*, *come upon*, *come to the scratch*, and numerous others.

In one important point (and this is the only really serious criticism that I would make) the dictionary proves a disappointment. This is in the matter of pronunciation. True, Judeo-German, with its simple vocalic system, is certainly one of the languages least adapted to transliterate a language with so difficult a phonetic system as English, but I cannot help thinking that the problem of suggesting an approximately correct English pronunciation might have been more satisfactorily solved. As it is, the transliterations adopted by the editors can only confirm those who use the book in precisely those faults of pronunciation that are characteristic of the Yiddish-speaking foreigners and which are apt to render their speech so disagreeable to Americans. I believe that an almost heroic attempt should have been made by the editors to convey some idea of the qualitative and quantitative nuances of the English vowels. If the use of at least certain diacritical marks would thus have been rendered unavoidable, no matter. If too great an expense would thereby have been entailed, it would have been excellent pedagogy and economy to have greatly decreased the compass of the book. Better half the number of pages and some indication, e.g. of the difference in pronunciation between the vowel of *fan* and that of *fen* (as it is,

they are so transliterated as to suggest an identical pronunciation, *fen*, for both). Nor is there anything to show that the *th* of a word like *this* is not identical with the *th* of a word like *thick*. And why, of all transliterations, is one chosen for *w* that necessarily suggests a pronunciation *hw* (incidentally *w* is not distinguished from *wh*)? But this is not the place to analyse the phonetic deficiencies of the work in detail. I wish merely to point out that the handling of the phonetic problem leaves much to be desired.

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